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ABSTRACT

Teacher confusion about what reading skills to teach and how to teach them can be decreased by the use of a problem solving, questioning model for instructional decision making. The following 12 questions can be used as a procedure for structuring teacher observation of student performance on a daily basis. Is the skill essential to the student's progress in reading? Is the student's performance on specific skills below an acceptable level of mastery? Does the student avoid using the skill in a variety of reading situations? Does the skill include important subskills that are essential to mastery of the general skill? Is there enough challenge in the activity to facilitate learning, yet enough success to keep the student motivated? Does the activity format elicit maximum student performance? Are the directions clear enough for the student to easily determine what to do? Does the reading activity assist the student to apply the skill in a variety of reading situations? Does the learning climate facilitate maximum student performance? Does the student need additional incentives to achieve maximum performance? Is the student's performance at an acceptable level of mastery? And, does the student use the skill in a variety of reading situations and in passage reading? (DF)

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# Twelve Practical Questions on Skills Instruction

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The large number of reading skills and the even larger variety of reading materials cause teachers to become confused about what skills to teach and how to select appropriate activities for development of these skills. This confusion causes teachers to need some method to evaluate skill development and instruction. There are a number of criterion-referenced management systems (i.e., Wisconsin Design for Reading Skill Development, Otto and Askov, 1972) that can be used for monitoring skill development. However, criterion-referenced systems are costly, time consuming to administer, and miss important performance objectives such as use or application of the skills in a variety of actual reading situations.

Structured observations of the student's performance can be used as an alternative method for determining skill needs and instructional procedures. Structured observations are helpful to teachers because they are inexpensive, can be used continuously, and reflect the reality of the student's reading tasks.

CS004 258

Teacher observations can be easily structured by asking a series of problem solving questions. The twelve questions suggested in this paper will assist teachers in developing a system for monitoring skill needs and instructional procedures. Answers to these questions will help the teacher make decisions on: whether a skill should be taught, what specific skill(s) should be taught, what skill activities to choose, how the learning climate can facilitate instruction, and when to terminate instruction.

However, before an attempt is made to answer the questions, teachers need to first observe the student's performance during a variety of reading situations such as: story reading, skill activities, teacher directed activities, reading games, and content field reading. Teachers should make brief records of their observations on file cards or notebook paper so that the student's performance can be systematically analyzed. After the teacher has made a number of observations and recorded the student's performance, the questions can be answered.

Questions one, two, and three will help the teacher determine whether a skill should be taught. As you read these questions, note that question number one must be answered "yes" before any skill should be taught. Either question two or three (but not necessarily both) should also be answered "yes" before a skill should be taught.

Question 1. Is the skill essential to the student's future progress in reading? When determining if a skill should be taught, it is first important to determine whether the skill is essential.

Many nonessential skills can be eliminated when teachers determine whether the skill is essential to the student's future progress.

Teachers can evaluate the "essentaility" of a skill by asking several sub-questions. First, teachers should ask, "Will the skill contribute to the student's long-range progress in reading?" For example, at the beginning reading level, skills such as recall of passage details are fairly essential to the student's long-range progress while sounding-out consonant blends are short-term skills. This example suggests another sub-question. The question is, "How essential is the skill to the student's understanding or comprehension of the reading?" Comprehension or understanding should be used as the basic measure for judging what is essential to the student's future progress. When comprehension is used as a basic criterion, some of the word attack skills can be evaluated in their proper perspective. However, the previous statement does not mean that all word attack skills are nonessential. The statement suggests that word attack skills are a means to understanding reading, rather than an end product.

Teachers should understand that comprehension is a complex process and involves many interrelated skills. Goodman's research (1973) indicates that reading is a sampling-predicting process in which the student uses graphic, syntactic, and semantic cues to get to the meaning. Goodman comments on this complexity by suggesting that graphic information reaches the reader visually while syntactic and semantic information are supplied by the reader as he processes the visual input. When the student experiences meaning

difficulty, the reader first questions what makes sense, then what would fit the grammatical structure, and last what graphic cues fit into the twin concepts of meaning and syntax. The instructional problem is that many teachers routinely give the student additional help with phonics when the real problem may be that the student needs help with sentence structure or word meaning. In some cases, an overemphasis of word attack skills such as vowel plus "r" may actually interfere with meaning.

After it is determined that the skill is essential, the reading skills should be given an instructional priority. Skills that would bring about the greatest amount of change in the student's reading performance should be given the highest priority. Thus, high priority skills should be taught first followed by skills that are assigned a lower priority.

Question 2. Is the student's performance on specific skills below an acceptable level of mastery? Determination of an acceptable level of mastery is another important question when arriving at a decision on whether a skill should be taught. Although some criterion-referenced tests suggest that mastery occurs at a particular level of performance, mastery should be viewed as relative. On skills such as the ability to pronounce basic sight words, the teacher may want to use a relatively high (90 percent) level of mastery. On other skills, such as identifying accented syllables, a relatively low (60 percent) level of mastery may be acceptable. The level of mastery should be high if the skill is interfering with the student's understanding of the passage and the student

has a frequent need for the skill in various reading situations. Mastery could be lower if the skill is only used occasionally and does not interfere with comprehension.

Decisions on the level of mastery (in question two) are closely related to decisions on "essentiality" (in question one). Skills which are essential to the student's future progress in reading will have a higher percentage for mastery, while skills which are less essential will have a lower percentage. Teachers may even want to reconsider whether a skill should be taught when it is determined that a low level of mastery is desirable.

Question 3. Does the student avoid using the skill in a variety of reading situations? Teachers often comment that some students perform well on skill activities, but do not use the skill in various reading situations. Teachers can answer this question by observing the student's performance and reflecting on whether the skill has been previously taught and mastered. Student use or application of skills can be categorized as limited use, use in selected situations, and use in a variety of situations. Additional assistance is needed when the student has limited or selected use of the reading skill.

This question recognizes that some students will not apply selected skills unless they are shown how the skill is used in a particular reading task. This special type of instruction should focus on application of the skill. Additional suggestions on instructional strategies for helping students with application problems are included in question eight.

Question four will help the teacher specify what should be taught. It is quite common for a number of reading skills to be included in one reading activity. For example, map reading includes skills such as: scale of miles, longitude, latitude, direction, legend, and proximity to other geographic areas. The next question will help the teacher identify teachable skills.

Question 4. Does the reading skill include important subskills that are essential to mastery of the general skill? Subskills should be specified if question four is answered "yes." A "no" answer means that the skill observed can be taught without additional specification. The instructional problem is that general skills are not teachable, while subskills are specific and teachable.

To identify teachable subskills, the teacher should first list all the subskills that the student should be able to do if given a particular reading task. The teacher should next observe the student working with the task to determine if each subskill is mastered. In some cases, specific tasks will need to be developed so that the teacher can observe performance on each subskill. An effortless way to do this is to ask the student to discuss his understanding of a skill when working with an activity. For example, teachers could test the student's understanding of cause-effect relationships from a social studies article by asking, "Explain the relationship between a specific event and the results or consequences of the event." It is this type of analytic observation of reading performance that gives the teacher important information on the student's instructional needs.

Skill specification has inherent strengths and limitations. The strengths are that specific skills are teachable, and teaching facilitates mastery. The limitation is that some students have difficulty transferring isolated skills to a variety of reading situations when needed. This limitation can be answered by referring to questions three, eight, and twelve on use or application of reading skills. These questions state that instruction is incomplete when teaching ends with mastery and does not go on to application and use.

The above interrelationship between questions pointedly suggests that answers to instructional problems are found both in the answers to each question and in the interrelationships that exist between questions. In other words, answers to instructional problems are limited when teachers consider issues such as "essentiality", mastery, use, skill specification, etc.; in isolation. The full impact of skills instruction can only be assessed through asking a number of questions which answer all the important issues that need to be considered during skills instruction.

Questions five, six, seven, and eight will help the teacher make decisions on selection of appropriate skill activities. The four questions ask for information on the difficulty level, format, directions, and application of the skill in various reading situations. "Yes" answers indicate desirable activities and "no" answers suggest the reading activity may need to be modified or that other activities will need to be found.

Question 5. Is there enough challenge in the skill activity to facilitate learning, yet enough success to keep the student motivated to complete the activity? Giving each student the right

level of difficulty on each reading activity is a challenge to most teachers. We've all seen tears come to some student's eyes when they have been given difficult reading assignments. The reaction, "Gee, this is real easy!" is just as bad. Repeatedly giving students activities that are either too difficult or easy causes instructional problems. Activities that are too easy cause the student to lack challenge and limit growth. Activities that are too difficult cause the student to develop feelings of failure.

Question five asks the teacher to place each reading activity on a challenge-success continuum so that decisions can be made about the difficulty level. If the student's initial performance on a skills activity is between 50 to 70 percent correct, there is enough success to complete the assignment, but something to be learned from working with the activity. Teachers should find the right difficulty level for each student. It should also be kept in mind that individual personality characteristics may be a part of this decision. For example, anxious students may need more success while competitive students may require more challenge.

Question 6. Does the activity format elicit maximum student performance? Student motivation and performance can be enhanced by changes in the format of the reading activity. All to frequently, teachers assign another workbook page or ditto sheet. By contrast, new and different reading activities bring about increased student motivation.

Teachers need to be sensitive to format considerations such as the shape, size, appearance, and style of the learning activity because some modes of presentation elicit more enthusiasm. For

example, some students have a more positive response to games while other students do better with teacher-directed activities. Format, as used in this context, also includes the type of student response. Typical reading activities require a written response. A variety of student responses can be elicited by choosing activities that ask for oral answers, matching cards, or moving parts of a game.

Teachers now have a variety of instructional formats at their disposal. For example, teacher made games are adaptable to specific skill needs and motivating for students who like to compete. Teacher-directed activities have the advantage that explanations can be provided when confusion exists, student attention is usually high, and some students respond better with supervision. Audio-visual materials combine visual and auditory inputs, use motivating presentations (i.e., cartoons), and are sometimes self-instructional.

Teachers need to find the type of reading activity that elicits maximum student performance. To do this, the teacher should observe the student when working with a variety of formats and analyze why a particular format elicits higher performance. This observation and the subsequent analysis will help the teacher set up criteria for reading activity selection.

Question 7. Are the directions clear enough so that the student can easily determine what to do? Many students fail on reading activities because they do not understand the directions. By contrast, a large percentage of the students succeed when they

can determine what is expected of them. One of the best ways to evaluate directions is to check to see if an example is included. Examples help students model their performance after the sample item(s).

Directions for reading activities should be analyzed to determine if they are short, simple, and behavioral. Explicit and behavioral directions help students understand the performance that is expected. Behavioral directions should also include the acceptable level of mastery. This is especially important when variable percentages are used for the acceptable level. Students tend to set goals for their performance when the student knows the acceptable level of mastery.

Yet, even when the directions are explicit and behavioral, some students have difficulty going from the example to the skills exercises. Observation reveals that many of these students are anxious, rigid, and fearful of failure. In some cases, the example inadvertently contributes to additional task anxiety because the sample exercise is easier than the skills exercises. The instructional problem is that the student expects the example to be representative of the exercises that follow. In some cases, the example only give information on how and where to respond and does not give information on the problem-solving process involved in arriving at an answer.

There are several things that can be done for students who do not understand what to do after they have completed the example. The directions may need to be elaborated upon and include several more items so that the examples are representative of the exercises that follow. Teachers may also need to individually explain the

problem-solving process that is needed to answer the exercises. The teacher may also want to check two or three of the student's responses to the exercises (to check his understanding of the directions) before all the exercises are completed. If the student is still not completing the exercises correctly, the teacher may want to question whether the exercise is too difficult as suggested in question five.

Question 8. Does the reading activity assist the student with applying the skill in a variety of reading situations? Some students show mastery on skill activities, but do not use the skill in other reading situations. This problem is one of transferring a skill which has been specified for learning and mastery to other reading activities. There are several ways to facilitate transfer. One way would be to have a variety of activity formats for working with a skill. When the learner is given one particular type of reading activity, the student tends to develop a response pattern to a skill activity and give a similar response to all activities that have the same format. Shifting formats causes the student to work with the skill in a variety of settings so that transfer to other reading situations is seen (on the part of the learner) as another shift in format.

Another way to facilitate transfer is to include passage reading as a part of the reading activity. This close proximity between the skill activity and use of the skill in passage reading facilitates transfer.

The crucial problem involved in transfer is one that educational psychologists call "identical elements" (Cronbach, 1963).

Transfer is difficult for students who are unable to see similarities (or identical elements) between the skill used in a reading activity and the same skill that is used in passage reading. Creative teachers help students see similarities by giving verbal clues such as, "Billy, the main idea statement asked for after this story is the same as the main idea activities we worked with several weeks ago on the transparencies." Students need help with associating the identical elements from previous activities to those needed in the present reading task. Teachers should also realize that transfer is difficult for some students because the typical reading task includes numerous other reading skills.

Questions nine and ten will assist the teacher with making decisions regarding the learning climate. Question nine considers external factors such as other pupils and the teacher. Question ten considers internal factors such as student motivation.

Question 9. Does the learning climate facilitate maximum student performance? Teachers should first check the learning climate of their classrooms because the classroom atmosphere is an important determiner of student performance. It should be attractive and reasonably free from distractors so that the students can complete their work. Teachers should be open and accessable, and be willing to explain directions and concepts that are difficult. The classroom should be task oriented and a high priority should be given to completing assignments. Each student should be given a place to do his assignments and other students should be asked to respect the work responsibilities of their classmates.

As the classroom manager, the teacher should be the model that sets up a friendly, work oriented classroom. In short, the

teacher should develop a positive and supportive classroom atmosphere so that each student is encouraged to give his best performance on all reading activities.

Question 10. Does the student need additional incentives to bring about maximum performance? Individual student motivation is an important determiner of performance. For a variety of reasons, poorly motivated students give less than their best performance. Some students lack sufficient challenge when working with reading activities. Other students are fearful of failure and even have difficulty completing the assignment. The quality of student performance can be enhanced by using additional incentives. Question ten asks teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of their reinforcement systems.

Poorly motivated students first need to be given activities at an appropriate level and the teacher needs to make sure the student understands the directions. However, other strategies can be used to enhance student motivation. Klausmeier and others (1975) suggest that goal setting, feedback, and reinforcement enhance motivation. Goal setting has already been discussed in question eleven. Feedback (such as, "Good recall of the story details.") also enhances motivation. However, teachers need to remember to qualify their verbal feedback. Comments such as "good" are reinforcing, but when the verbal reinforcer answers the question "Good what?" the learner is given additional feedback on his performance. This feedback information helps students: gain valuable information on their performance, monitor their own performance, and increase the level of their performance (Eberwein, 1977)

Some motivated students need more tangible reinforcement. These students can be given ribbons, sugar-free gum, or time to play

their favorite game. However, tangible reinforcers are a means to increasing motivation and not an end. Teachers should work toward diminishing tangible reinforcers so that students are motivated by the reading task.

Question ten (on motivation) is closely related to questions one, five, and six. Motivation and reinforcement should be analyzed in the accompanying contexts of whether the skill is essential to the student's future progress in reading (question one), whether the skill activities are interesting (question five), and whether the student can successfully complete the activity (question six). Motivation is usually higher when the students know the importance of the skill, the activities are interesting, and the activities can be successfully completed. The previous three suggestions are additional procedures the teacher can use to enhance motivation and diminish the need for reinforcers.

Questions eleven and twelve will help the teacher determine when instruction on specific skills should be terminated. Questions eleven and twelve are restatements of questions two and three on mastery and use of reading skills. The last two questions should be considered together. Both questions should be answered "yes" before instruction is terminated.

Question 11. Is the student's performance at an acceptable level of mastery? Performance on skill activities helps the teacher determine when to stop instruction. Careful observation and records of the student's performance helps with this decision. Performance on skills activities should be between 60 to 90 percent correct. Eighty percent can be used as an average mastery level. As previously stated, lower percentages may be acceptable for some skills while higher percentages may be desirable on important reading skills. As noted in questions one and two, decisions on the level of mastery should be made on the basis of whether the skill is essential to the student's future progress in reading.

Question 12. Does the student use the skill in a variety of reading situations and in passage reading? Instruction should be terminated when the skill is used in a variety of reading situations. When the student is not using a skill, instruction should be directed toward transfer and use of the skill as discussed in question eight.

One possible way to test the student's understanding of a skill is to ask for a verbal statement on how the reading skill is used. With map reading, for example, ask the student to explain how the legend can be used, how the scale of miles determines distance, how directions are determined, etc. Verbal statements ask the student to formulate generalizations about the skill. Analysis of the student's statements will help the teacher gain insight into the student's understanding of the skill so that the teacher can determine the focus for additional instruction.

In conlusion, teacher confusion about what skills to teach and how to teach these skills can be decreased by using a problem solving, questioning model for instructional decision making. The twelve questions can be used as a procedure for structuring the teacher's observations of the student's performance on a daily basis. Answers to these questions will guide the teacher in making sound decisions on reading skill development.

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